THREE SPECIAL STUDIES IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF THE BLIND

William B. Wait

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IN THE

SOCIOLOGY OF THE BLIND

By WILLIAM B. WAIT,

Emeritus Principal of The New York Institution for the Blind.

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Three Special Studies in the Sociology of the Blind.

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With the purpose of securing data that might be of value in solving the problems to which the loss of the sense of sight gives rise, three enumerations have been made of adult blind people in the care of the county, town and city authorities of this State.

These three inquiries were made in the autumn of the years 1879, 1895, and 1905. The interval between the first and second inquiry was sixteen years, that between the second and third was ten years, and that between the first and third was twenty-six years. In each case the information was courteously supplied by the authorities upon identical forms.

TABLE 1.

NUMBER OF BLIND PEOPLE IN THE ALMSHOUSES OF THE SEVERAL COUNTIES.

	1879	*1895*	*1905*		*1879*	*1895*	*1905*
Albany	5	2	..	Oneida	9	6	9
Allegany	1	5	..	Onondaga	7	3	6
Broome	7	1	5	Ontario	2	1	2
Cattaraugus	..	2	..	Orange	6	4	6
Cayuga	1	4	5	Orleans	4	3	6
Chautauqua	5	4	3	Oswego	3	5	2
Chemung	2	4	4	Otsego	1	3	3
Chenango	4	3	4	Putnam	2	4	1
Clinton	2	6	3	Queens	3	..	..
Columbia	6	2	1	Rensselaer	2	8	6
Cortland	6	3	1	Richmond	1	2	..
Delaware	1	4	3	Rockland	1	2	..
Dutchess	5	1	6	Saratoga	3	..	1
Erie	8	6	16	Seneca	..	..	..
Essex	6	2	1	Schoharie	1	2	2
Franklin	..	4	..	Schenectady	3	..	1
Fulton	1	1	1	Schuyler	..	1	..
Genesee	..	1	3	Suffolk	2	4	7
Greene	2	..	2	Sullivan	2	2	1
Hamilton	..	..	..	Steuben	3	1	3
Herkimer	..	2	5	St. Lawrence	5	4	2
Jefferson	3	4	4	Tioga	..	..	..
Kings	16	19	47	Tompkins	1	..	3
Lewis	1	1	1	Ulster	8	5	5
Livingston	4	2	4	Warren	3	4	2
Madison	1	2	5	Washington	3	2	1
Monroe	18	3	7	Wayne	1	2	..
Montgomery	5	4	1	Westchester	3	2	..
Nassau	..	..	1	Wyoming	1	1	1
New York	112	112	153	Yates	2	[illegible]	3
Niagara	3	1	2	.....	..	..	..
Total					307	276	361

TABLE 2.

AGE AT WHICH SIGHT WAS LOST.

	1879	*1895*	*1905*
At birth	14	9	11
Between 1 and 10	9	13	8
Between 10 and 20	14	10	14
Between 20 and 30	30	19	15
Between 30 and 40	44	34	43
Between 40 and 50	53	35	61
Between 50 and 60	57	42	77
Between 60 and 70	46	36	61
Between 70 and 80	26	33	47
Between 80 and 90	14	8	11
Between 90 and 100	..	..	1
Between 100 and 110	..	1	..
Total	307	240	349
Not given	..	36	12
Total	307	276	361

Of the whole number, the percentage known to have lost their sight under twenty years of age was:

In 1879	12.05 per cent.
In 1895	11.59 per cent.
In 1905	9.14 per cent.

TABLE 3.

NUMBER IN EACH DECADE OF LIFE.

	1879	*1895*	*1905*
Under 10 years of age	..	1	..
Between 10 and 20	3	1	4
Between 20 and 30	12	13	8
Between 30 and 40	22	26	12
Between 40 and 50	44	28	46
Between 50 and 60	64	45	65
Between 60 and 70	69	53	85
Between 70 and 80	66	58	97
Between 80 and 90	23	20	32
Between 90 and 100	4	3	4
Between 110 and 120	..	1	..
Total	307	249	353
Not given	..	27	8
Total	307	276	361

TABLE 4.

PERIOD OF ATTENDANCE AT SCHOOL.

	1879		1895		1905	
	School for Seeing.	*School for Blind.*	*School for Seeing.*	*School for Blind.*	*School for Seeing.*	*School for Blind.*
1 year	10	..	6	..	2	4
2 years	13	3	9	..	4	4
3 years	21	1	24	1	14	2
4 years	20	5	12	..	16	1
5 years	24	2	18	4	14	3
6 years	17	4	22	3	25	3
7 years	11	3	15	3	10	2
8 years	16	2	21	1	13	..
9 years	8	1	5	2	18	1
10 years	14	..	6	2	25	..
11 years	..	..	1	..	3	1
12 years	2	..	3	1	43	..
14 years	3	..	1	..	20	..
15 years	..	..	2	..	10	..
16 years	..	..	1	..	6	..
	159	21	146	17	223	21

AVERAGE PERIOD OF ATTENDANCE.

In 1879	Seeing schools, 5.6 years	Blind schools, 5.2 years
In 1895	Seeing schools, 5.8 years	Blind schools, 7 years
In 1905	Seeing schools, 8.9 years	Blind schools, 4.2 years

Number who never attended any school, 1879, 146, or 47.5 per cent.
Number who never attended any school, 1895, 130, or 47.1 per cent.
Number who never attended any school, 1905, 121, or 33.5 per cent.

TABLE 5.

OCCUPATIONS BEFORE LOSING SIGHT.

	1879		1895		1905	
	Men.	*Women.*	*Men.*	*Women.*	*Men.*	*Women.*
Artificial flower maker	..	1	..	..	..	..
Artist	1	..	2	..	3	..
Baker	1	..	3	..	3	..
Blacksmith	4	..	5	..	4	..
Butcher	1	..	3	..	4	..
Boatman	1	..	..	..	..	..
Boat Captain	..	..	1	..	..	..
Brass Finisher	..	..	1	..	..	..
Brush Maker	..	..	1	..	..	..
Box Maker	..	..	1	..	..	..
Bookkeeper	..	..	..	..	3	..
Bartender	..	..	..	..	2	..
Carpenter	2	..	3	..	5	..
Contractor	1	..	..	..	..	..
Cloth Presser	1	..	..	..	..	..
Cooper	2	..	3	..	2	..
Clerk	1	..	..	..	3	..
Coach Maker	..	..	1	..	..	..
Cigar Maker	..	..	1	..	1	..
Cooks	..	..	..	4	..	1
Drover	1	..	..	..	..	..
Druggist	1	..	..	..	1	..
Driver	..	..	2	..	5	..
Dyer	..	..	1	..	..	..
Dock Builder	..	..	..	..	1	..
Dealer in Horses	..	..	..	..	1	..
Dressmaker	..	..	..	2	..	..
Engineer	..	..	1	..	4	..
Fireman	1	..	..	..	..	..
Farmer	..	..	12	..	5	..
Fisherman	..	..	1	..	..	..
Florist	..	..	1	..	..	..
Gilder	..	..	1	..	..	..
Grocer	..	..	1	..	..	..
Grinder	..	..	..	..	1	..
Grain Business	..	..	..	..	1	..
Hack Driver	..	..	..	..	1	..
Hostler	1	..	..	..	..	..
Hotel Keeper	..	..	1	..	..	..
Housework	..	109	..	60	..	138

	1879		1895		1905	
	Men.	Women.	Men.	Women.	Men.	Women.
Iron Worker	..	..	1	..	3	..
Iron Moulder	..	..	..	..	1	..
Laborer	76	..	44	..	80	..
Letter Carrier	1	..	..	..	..	..
Longshoreman	..	..	..	..	1	..
Laundress	..	..	..	6	..	1
Mason	4	..	1	..	1	..
Miner	1	..	..	..	..	..
Moulder	..	..	1	..	1	..
Machinist	..	..	..	..	1	..
Oysterman	1	..	..	..	..	..
Painter	1	..	2	..	4	..
Plasterer	1	..	..	..	1	..
Peddler	1	..	4	..	1	..
Plumber	..	..	1	..	1	..
Piano Maker	..	..	1	..	..	..
Porter	..	..	..	..	1	..
Quarryman	2	..	1	..	2	..
Sailor	2	..	3	..	3	..
Stonecutter	3	..	..	..	..	..
Soldier	1	..	..	..	..	..
Ship Carpenter	1	..	..	..	..	..
Sailmaker	1	..	..	..	..	..
Shoemaker	..	..	2	..	2	..
School Teacher	..	..	1	..	..	..
Steamfitter	..	..	..	..	2	..
Salesman	..	..	..	..	1	..
Seaman	..	..	..	..	1	..
Seamstress	..	9	..	2	..	1
Ropemaker	..	..	..	..	1	..
Roofer	..	..	..	..	1	..
Tanner	18	..	..	..	..	..
Tinsmith	2	..	..	..	1	..
Tailor	4	..	4	..	14	..
Teamster	3	..	1	..	3	..
Typecaster	..	..	1	..	..	..
Typemaker	..	..	..	..	1	..
Type Rubber	1	..	..	..	..	..
Tailoress	..	1	..	1	..	1
Upholsterer	..	..	..	..	1	..
Violinist	..	..	1	..	..	..
Valet	..	..	..	..	1	..
Watchman	2	..	..	..	..	..
Weaver	1	..	1	..	..	..
Watchmaker	1	..	..	..	..	..
Waiter	..	..	..	..	3	..

ATTENDANCE AT SCHOOL.

By reference to Table 4 it will be seen that, so far as is known, the number who never attended any school was, in 1879, 146, or 47.5 per cent.; in 1895, 130, or 47.1 per cent., and in 1905, 121, or 33.5 per cent.

The number who attended school during the period of sight was, in 1879, 159, or 51.8 per cent.; in 1895, 146, or 52.9 per cent., and in 1905, 223, or 61.8 per cent.

The average period of attendance in schools for the blind was, in 1879, 5.2 years; in 1895, 7 years, and in 1905, 4.2 years.

The number who had attended schools for the seeing and schools for the blind was:

In 1879.....	12	Average period, 8.4 years
In 1895.....	3	Average period, 11.3 years
In 1905.....	5	Average period, 6.2 years

The number who have attended a school for the blind was:

In 1879	21
In 1895	17
In 1905	21

EDUCATION PREVENTS DEPENDENCE.

These facts when considered in connection with the work of the schools for the blind at New York City and at Batavia afford some valuable deductions.

Since the establishment of this Institution in 1831 as a school for the education of the blind, 2,071 young persons, most of whom entered in childhood, have gone out after receiving a suitable course of instruction. Besides these, 931 have gone out from the State School at Batavia, making a total of 3,002 who, having been well trained, well informed and usefully qualified, have returned to their places in the world, to do their part in the social and business relations of life. Of this large number, the great majority of whom, according to the expectation of life, are still living, *only 21* were public dependents in 1905, *the number in this class not having increased since 1879*, as shown in Table 4. During this interval the number of blind

persons at public charge has increased from 307 to 361. These facts afford convincing proof of the real efficacy of the education of the young blind.

The history of those who have attended a school for the blind will show causes of dependence other than blindness, as orphanage, early neglect, abandonment, the transmitted effects of alcohol and narcotics, epilepsy, mental and physical weakness, and perverseness.

And yet a school for the blind was the only means by which an effort could be made to develop such powers as they possessed, to instruct them in the conduct of life, and fit them for rational and decent living. The apparent results in unpromising cases may be meagre and discouraging, but, nevertheless, no child should be left to a life of helplessness and ignorance without an effort to rescue it therefrom by education.

OCCUPATIONS MADE USELESS BY BLINDNESS.

Table 5 shows the occupations learned during the period of sight and abandoned after vision had been obscured.

Recognizing that other causes may operate with even greater effect than blindness to cause dependence, and that neglect by the family and the immediate community usually results in care at the public charge, still the facts clearly indicate that blindness disqualifies a person for the successful pursuit of mechanical employments, as also for those to which sight is essential, and reason, observation and experience confirm this view.

NUMBER AT PUBLIC CHARGE IN METROPOLITAN DISTRICT EXCEEDS NORMAL NUMBER.

In the course of this inquiry some other facts were brought to view which will be interesting to notice in this connection.

The population of the State at the respective dates, in round numbers, was:

In 1879	5,000,000
In 1895	7,000,000
In 1905	8,066,672

The total number of blind in the almshouses of the counties now forming the Greater City of New York was:

					Total.
In 1879....	New York, 112	Kings, 16	Queens, 3	Richmond, 1	132
In 1905....	New York, 153	Kings, 47	Queens, 0	Richmond, 0	200
	Inc. 41	Inc. 31	Dec. 3	Dec. 1	68

The net total increase is 68, or 51.51 per cent.

The total number for the other counties of the State was:

In 1879	175
In 1905	161
Decrease	14, or 8 per cent.

The population of the area now forming the City of New York was approximately:

In 1879	1,900,000	Other counties	3,100,000
In 1905	3,850,000	Other counties	4,216,672
Increase	1,950,000	Increase	1,116,672

Hence it is seen that while the population of this metropolitan district has gained 103 per cent. since 1879, the number of blind in the local almshouses has increased 51.51 per cent.; and while the population of the other counties has risen 36.02 per cent. the blind in their almshouses has decreased 8 per cent.

Assuming that the ratio of blind to the whole population in 1905 was the same as in 1900, the number of blind people in the State in 1905 was by estimation 6,667. Of this number, 5,152 were outside of New York City and 1,515 were within the city. The number of blind at public charge for the State in 1905 was 361, or one in 18 of the blind population. If now the blind at public charge were distributed according to the distribution of the whole number of blind, as would seem to be reasonable, the number of such dependents outside of the City of New York would be 279, while the number within the City of New York would be 82. Instead of 82, however, there were 200 blind persons at public charge in the City of New York in 1905, and 161 in the other counties.

RATIO OF BLINDNESS IN METROPOLITAN DISTRICT MUCH LESS THAN IN OTHER PARTS OF THE STATE.

It has been observed that for some years past the ratio of the blind to the whole population has been decreasing in New York City, as compared with the rest of the State. As shown by the United States census of 1900, the number of blind persons in this metropolitan district was 1,364 and the population 3,621,459, *making the ratio of the blind to the whole population one in every 2,655.* The number of blind in the other portions of the State was 4,644, and the whole population 3,647,435, *giving a ratio of one blind person in every 785.* These figures are most impressive. The diminished ratio of blind in this metropolitan district, as compared with the rest of the State, is unquestionably due to the beneficent enforcement of the Derby law, requiring the stated and frequent examination of the eyes of all children upon and after entering the custodial institutions, to the general study of Ophthalmology in the medical schools, the supervision of midwives, the proximity of dispensaries and hospitals for diseases of the eye, and to other preventive and remedial agencies, that are operating much more generally and effectively within than outside of this metropolitan district.

The causes for the excessive number of dependent blind in this district must therefore be sought elsewhere.

May it not be that the adult blind of the contiguous territory of this and of adjacent states, and even those from distant parts, are attracted by the varied excitements, activities and diversions of city life, and by the public and private philanthropies of our city, which are broad and liberal? In any case the subject is worthy of study, both as to cause and remedy, in order to safeguard the city against the imposition of unjust burdens.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES NEEDED.

Furthermore, and much more important, it would seem that if the same preventive measures that are enforced in this city had been made equally effective throughout the State, the result would have been a reduction in the whole number of blind persons in 1905 from 6,667 to approximately 3,000, and about

3,600 citizens of the State might have been saved from this great affliction. The subject admits of development along social and economic lines, but the simple statement of facts already made is sufficient to indicate that there is imperative need for remedial action, dictated alike by humane and social considerations, and by a sound economic policy.

NOTE.—During recent years three Homes for adult blind persons have been established in Manhattan and in Brooklyn, and at the close of 1905 the number of blind persons reported therefrom was 141. Of these, 43 had attended some school for the blind, 82 had attended schools for the seeing, 5 had attended both kinds of schools, while 11 had not attended any school. Seventy-three were reported as having followed some profession, trade or occupation before losing their sight. As this data was not available at the time of the inquiry of 1879, it has not been incorporated in the foregoing tables.

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WAIT, WILLIAM B.

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